

Food, a big think

How to make food security work for us

FOOD farming is a big business. Elsewhere, that is. Here in Malaysia, surplus is a bridge too far. Some old habits have a way of keeping our farmers where they are. Even behind our neighbours like Thailand and Vietnam, according to Professor Dr Abdul Shukor Juraimi, dean of the Faculty of Agriculture, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

We do not even produce enough to meet our needs. Take three common food on an average Malaysian table. We farm only 70 per cent of the rice we eat. The data withers as we move to fruits (66 per cent) and vegetables (48 per cent). The rest is imported at a hefty bill to the government, all in all more than RM50 billion and growing. But Covid-19 is telling us something: be food secure. Surplus can come later. But before we get to what needs to be done, one point needs to be made.

Some argue that we need not be self-sufficient to be food secure. Very often Singapore is quoted as an example of a no-food-grown-here country which is food secure. This is true up to a point. Throw in a pandemic and that confidence is shaken to its roots. Besides, Covid-19 is no friend of *ceteris paribus*. Borders close and the usually reliable supply chain grinds to a halt. Ventilators are not food, but we saw in them how selfish countries wanted them all to themselves. Even states within the United States were competing to deny the other of the much needed ventilators. Just substitute ventilators for food and you get the picture.

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So how do we get there? One, put more money into research and development as this newspaper reported yesterday ("Covid-19 has threatened world food security"). The plight of our farmers must form part of this R&D. Very often these toiling hands are not made part of the big picture we chase after. This must change. They may be working on a mere million hectares, with just one to seven hectares each, but the close to

500,000 farmers put food on our table.

If we want to stay fed, we must look after their welfare. Shukor sees a role for the private sector in our R&D efforts as our public funds are rather limited. Private companies must be made to see the benefits of their spend in food farming. Two, technology is a solution but not the US kind. Unless, of course, we are thinking of turning all the million hectares into parcels of food plantation. The reality is that the land here comes in bite sizes, and there is not much to go around either. Manpower, too, is an issue for struggling farmers. Shukor has a UPM solution. For long the university has been enticing the young into food farming.

The idea is if the first generation of our farmers, who are now in the 60s, are somewhat averse to technology, the new generation of farmers will succeed where the former struggled. It has had some success. But turning Malaysia into a food secure country isn't just the job of one UPM. Or many UPMs. Getting people into or even to stay in a sector that makes little money isn't an easy one for anyone to do. Food farming must be made profitable, easy and productive.

This is a big, multiparty play. Universities are just one element of the equation. The rest are the farmers, policymakers, agencies and the private sector.